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ABSTRACT

A case is put forward for incorporating the skills, attitudes, perspectives, and sensitivities of liberal learning into training programs in the workplace. Liberal learning not only results in employees who possess the skills, insights, breadth of understanding, flexibility and tolerance traditionally associated with liberal arts graduates but is also a way to strike a balance between theory and application. Educators must find a way to bring this learning to those who are dealing now with technological and organizational change, with increased pluralism in the workforce, with a clientele that is increasingly international, with ethical questions not confronted before, with competitive pressures that are global in scope. Specifically, the paper: (1) examines some of the more obvious advantages of building liberal education into training programs for the employer; (2) identifies the principal differences, theoretical and applied, between training and education, and suggests ways that each can contribute to the quality of the other; (3) clarifies the relationship between subject matter and liberal learning, and suggests specific ways to use the first to promote the second; and (4) identifies problems to be expected in making the mix between training and liberal learning fruitful, and suggests strategies to avoid these difficulties. (EJV)

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# LIBERAL EDUCATION THROUGH TRAINING:
# BRINGING HIGHER EDUCATION TO THE WORKPLACE

-by-

Dr. William A. O'Brien

Plato? . . . Faulkner? . . . Thoreau? . . . Twain? . . . In training sessions? Must be some sort of gimmick!

On the contrary. To engage the ideas and suggestions of the world's greatest minds, those with the most to offer on the subject at hand, is just about the least gimmicky approach to training and staff development one can imagine. But it is so much more.

It is a vehicle, heretofore untapped, for educators to introduce the skills, the attitudes, the perspective, and the sensitivity of liberal learning directly into the workplace, to managers, supervisors, and skilled personnel unlikely to encounter them in any other way. It is an opportunity to touch millions of adult lives with the excitement of academic excellence and the challenge of self-directed learning within the curriculum they know best, the "curriculum of the workplace." It is a way to strike that elusive balance between theory and application that has baffled so many educators and frustrated so many students for so long. It is education that is truly client-driven, quality instruction that is tailored to the needs of the learner, not to the subject matter priorities of the instructor. It is education that is vital, relevant, and engaging, education that is largely self-directed and only minimally didactic.

Building liberal learning into training offers a positive enrollment alternative to the frustration of trying to convince skeptical adults that classes in the arts, in history, and in literature will someday pay off in real dollars. It ends liberal education's reliance on the too-few progressive CEO's willing to mandate it from the top as its only way into the workplace. It offers educators the long overdue chance to take the offensive against the extremes of careerism. It promises to re-define Continuing Education's role as "step-child" on many college campuses by making it the very essence of higher education's ability to serve. It forces academic departments and disciplines to re-think tradition and to break free from the rigidity that has paralyzed so many and rendered them ineffectual providers of liberal learning to those who need it most. But first and foremost, it plants seeds that often germinate into a desire to know, the principal ingredient in adult learning that is self-directed and truly life-long.

This paper will examine the opportunities and the challenges involved in bringing liberal education to the workplace in training programs. Specifically, it will:

a) examine some of the more obvious advantages such an initiative promises for the employer, for the adult learner, and for the academy;

b) identify the principal differences, theoretical and applied, between training and education, and suggest ways that each can contribute to the quality of the other;

c) clarify the relationship between subject matter and liberal learning, and suggest specific ways to use the first to promote the second; and

d) identify problems to be expected in making the mix between training and liberal learning fruitful, and suggest strategies to avoid them.

## To Put Adult Education and Liberal Learning in Perspective

Who could have predicted, even a decade ago, that corporate America would be in the forefront of a crusade to convert the young to a liberal arts education? And who would have guessed that graduate business schools across the nation would be competing for liberal arts graduates for tomorrow's MBA's? Or that these bastions of conservatism would be incorporating "touchy-feely" courses like "Human Resource Management" and "Personality and Leadership" into practical programs renowned for being devoid of such "foolishness?" Have we come full circle? Is this corporate America's version of "back to the basics?" Hardly.

Despite suggestions to the contrary from pundits of every stripe who seem too inclined to subscribe to the obvious, corporate America is not calling for "business-as-it-used-to-be" from our colleges and universities. If that were true, then this dramatic shift in the educational priorities of business would be little more than an ironic twist in that careerist folly which produced the problems in the first place. It would make the tens of billions of dollars that business is spending annually on training unnecessary, and it would make corporate America's own entry into the higher education business seem redundant and wasteful, if not foolhardy. [A recent study by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) reports that 18 corporations now offer college-level degree programs on site. That number will increase by 13 in the next two years. See AAACE Newsletter, February 1987, p. 5.] Clearly, this latest initiative in support of the liberal arts signals corporate concerns more serious than many of the "experts"

realize. It reflects something approaching a crisis in the skill requirements of American business.

What business is looking for, of course, are the products of liberal learning, employees who possess the skills, the insights, the breadth of understanding, the flexibility, the sensitivity, and the tolerance that usually surface in liberal arts graduates. Business is not concerned so much with the subject matter in classes it has begun to promote as with the changes that take place in those who study that subject matter. Not employees familiar with Shakespeare, or Plato, or Faulkner, or Freud, but the liberal learner that emerges from challenging encounters with them.

Already we are witnessing signs of change in this direction at all levels of American education. Problem-solving, reading and writing skills, and critical thinking are in the forefront of curricular concerns. Interdisciplinary cooperation has become the by-word on college campuses. Adult illiteracy has spawned a crusade against ignorance. Life-skills instruction is a given in virtually every syllabus. For tomorrow's graduate, corporate America's initiative is already beginning to pay dividends.

But what about the millions of adult learners already on the job? Employers certainly cannot send them back to school for four years. Not even some of them. For just one year. Even if they could, it would not be to take classes in Shakespeare, or Art History, or the Romantic Novel. Imagine trying to justify that to investors or profit-conscious stockholders! And chances are slim-to-none that employees who really should will ever take these classes on their own. After all, if they were inclined to do that, they probably wouldn't need them anyway.

Educators must find a way to bring liberal learning to adults already in the workplace, to those who are dealing now with technological and organizational change, with increased pluralism in the workforce, with a clientele that is increasingly international, with ethical questions not confronted before, with competitive pressures that are global in scope. It is they who will determine America's future, not tomorrow's graduates. It is they who will make America more competitive. Thus it is in them that business continues to invest billions of training dollars in employee development programs that are, in truth, intensive, short-term alternatives to the liberal learning that educators have yet to deliver.

There, in skill-specific workshops and seminars devoid of material not directly job-related (the academic "fill" that presumably makes liberal arts programs impractical), trainers work to alleviate problems that the lack of liberal learning creates. There, in "how to" sessions ranging from resolving conflicts to building teams, from writing reports to making decisions, from implementing policy to leading people, from motivating those who don't care to rewarding those who do, trainers confront the kinds of "people problems" that limit productivity and frustrate managers.

But training without liberal learning cannot cure these problems. It can only arrest them. For training is task-oriented, not people-oriented. It addresses problems; it does not change attitudes. It defines limits; it does not broaden horizons. It stimulates; it does not sensitize. It energizes; it does not engage. It focuses on doing things right; it never addresses the right thing to do. Its aim is to generate answers, not to provoke questions. To eliminate doubt, not to encourage it. To stifle skepticism, not

to stimulate it. To pursue closure, not to postpone it.

If higher education is to respond to the needs that prompt business to champion the liberal arts, it must do more than reorganize curriculum, restructure departments, and repackage courses. For the company content to wait for the cream of the graduate crop, those changes might be good enough. But complacency is hard to find in today's world. Corporate America's need is more immediate. It is now. And it demands liberal education for the adult learner.

## Ends and Means: Subject Matter and Liberal Learning

Though educators have begun to address seriously the ingredients of liberal learning, imposing obstacles remain. Perhaps the principal one concerns the near total commitment that many educators have for the content they teach, a fixation with disseminating what they know to those who don't that is so powerful as to prohibit them from pursuing that mysterious mix between subject matter and skill development that drives liberal learning.

Educators have long been able to identify the "outcomes" which comprise a liberal education, and they know that liberal arts graduates are most likely to acquire them. Beyond that, though, most offer little more than their unabiding faith that certain content in certain courses, presented at a certain time in a certain sequence, will produce a certain type of person. Frequently they are right. Sometimes they aren't. But even when they are, they are often hard put to explain why what happened happened. Until they can, their contribution to liberal learning will be limited to the role they are playing now -- one rung on the long, four-year

ladder that leads to a liberal arts degree. Until they can, they have little to offer employers or those they employ.

Despite assumptions to the contrary from many who should know better, exposure to certain content does not automatically produce liberal learning. It does not occur by osmosis. Subject matter, in the hands of a skilled instructor, is a means to that end. It is not the end itself. Until learners engage content, until they begin to process it, to do something with it, no education happens. Until they go beyond the <u>whats</u> of information they encounter to the <u>whys</u> and <u>what-ifs</u> that help them understand it, real learning cannot take place. It is precisely here, at the point where liberal learning begins, that many educators unwittingly stifle it by assuming that all education stops when they do. In fact, it is just beginning.

Subject matter must <u>drive</u> liberal education by forcing the learner to call upon seldom-used critical skills in order to engage it successfully. It is content that promotes thinking. Without it, there is little reason to think critically, if at all. Without it, reading and writing become pointless exercises. Without it, there are no problems to solve, no decisions to make, no facts to interpret, no data to evaluate.

It is the exercise of these faculties that promotes liberal learning, for they raise the questions, pose the possibilities, unearth the dilemmas, and create the choices that alter attitudes and sharpen sensibilities. Traditionally, it has been the subject matter in liberal arts courses (as distinguished from the instructor who presents it) that has spawned these experiences. Hence the trek back to the liberal arts.

Here, then, is the major reason that training has not been more successful in resolving "people problems" in the workplace. The reason that it can never be an adequate substitute for liberal learning. Rather than viewing content as the means to an end, as a vehicle to promote skill development and the liberal outcomes it engenders, trainers (and far too many educators) see the presentation of subject matter and learner mastery of it as an end in itself, as the essence of the educational process. Rather than forcing learners to use the skills in question, trainers naturally convert those skills into content first. The result, as in the most didactic classroom, is that learners never fully engage that subject matter. They may discuss it. They may even become excited about it. But they have no occasion to move beyond the literal to interpretive and applied levels of comprehension. Until they do, they have no reason to call forth skills that promote liberal learning.

Sternberg and Wagner, in their 1982 report to the National Commission on Excellence on Education (research that led to the "Nation at Risk" study) caution educators against direct instruction in skills. They report that reading and writing skills improve measureably only when students feel the need to read and write. Likewise, they suggest that problem-solving skills imposed from without are less beneficial than strategies devised by students themselves to address real problems.

The message is clear. Content drives learning. And the truly gifted instructor facilitates the process. In order to introduce liberal learning into training, all who train must become educators. They must begin to look at content as valuable primarily for the questions it raises, for the hard choices it presents, for the skills

it demands. Obviously, content that can do those things is not limited to the liberal arts classroom or to the courses traditionally taught there. The stuff of management training is rich in that same potential.

By linking liberal learning and training, educators can take advantage of curriculum designed especially for the workplace. They can finally overcome that seemingly endless call for relevance by tailoring subject matter directly to client needs. They can achieve that balance between theory and application that has eluded educators for so long. At last, they can begin to evaluate subject matter for its academic value rather than its longevity. And most important, they can begin to see the flaws in a tradition that measures educational quality by the amounts of information students retain rather than by the skills they develop and by the people they become.

With so many educators wedded to four years of full-time study as the only avenue to liberal learning, however, the immediate prospects for adults in the workplace are less than encouraging. Can those who have committed their lives to the subject they teach suddenly begin to view it as a means to some greater end? Can they overcome a tradition of arrogance that prohibits clients from defining their own needs, and that forbids learners to address their instructors by anything other than ceremonial titles? Can they free themselves from credit-hours, disciplines, academic calendars, 50-minute class periods, and the other trappings of a live-on-campus age that exists no more and is highly inappropriate for adult learners? Can they remain flexible enough to maneuver under the

weight of bureaucrats and budget analysts, responsive principally to class sizes, enrollment increases, and higher student-teacher ratios? Can they respond effectively to a market that does not fit rigid funding ratios, "ftes" requirements, and other refinements of quantification that have rendered higher education somewhat moribund and highly inflexible? Can instructors familiar with students who often don't care adjust to the challenge of adult learners who do? Are they, in fact, up to any challenges at all? Until educators answer these questions, liberal learning's entry into the workplace will remain on hold. And employers will continue to rely on training.

## A Concluding Statement

Much of the literature on Adult Education links life-long learning to changing technology -- to keep up, adults will have to upgrade skills continually and probably re-train. More than once.

In order for learning to be truly life-long, however, educators must do more. They must raise the kinds of questions that instill a desire to know more, and they must work to activate the kinds of skills adults will need to find out. Only then will learning become self-directed. Only then will it empower learners.

This paper introduces a strategy for initiating that process now. In the workplace. For today's adults. With lots of hard work (and some luck), many of today's trainees will become tomorrow's students. To that end, this paper is dedicated.

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